

Washington, DC – Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) applauded steps taken by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to restore benefit eligibility to some of the more than 250,000 “Priority 8” Veterans prevented since 2003 from receiving VA care even though their incomes are often too low to purchase private health insurance. In a briefing before the House Appropriations Committee, VA representatives explained that this month the agency will distribute to VA hospitals and clinics \$375 million appropriated for Priority 8 Veterans for this year. This funding was a direct result of Congressman Sestak’s second Veterans Summit, held last May at Ridley High School. —

Chairman Bob Filner of the Committee on Veterans Affairs attended the 7th District summit and, after hearing from the Congressman, regional VA leaders and Veterans in attendance, told Congressman Sestak that he wanted them to work together to increase funding for Priority 8 Veterans. Following the summit, Chairman Filner and Congressman Sestak each submitted bills to expand the availability of health benefits to more Veterans. This led to the inclusion of \$375 million in the 2009 appropriations bill for Military Construction and Veterans Affairs specifically allotted for Priority 8s.

“I applaud the VA for quickly taking action to make the resources they have received for this purpose available as soon as possible to Veterans who need them,” said Congressman Sestak. “However, this issue cannot be put on the back-burner until we have a solution that works for all Veterans. We have a moral obligation to ensure that the men and women who put nation before self to serve in our Armed Forces receive the best possible health care.”

Congressman Sestak also announced that he submitted legislation today aimed to assist additional middle class and lower income Veterans unable to pay for treatments they need because of a policy enacted in 2003 when the Administration began banning “Priority 8” Veterans from the VA health system. The Congressman’s bill makes funding available within the Priority 7 category (representing Veterans whose injuries are not service-related and whose income is more than approximately \$28,000, but less than 80 percent of the community’s median income) and to Priority 8 veterans (representing Veterans whose injuries are not service related and whose incomes are higher than Priority 7 Veterans) by changing the income requirements for benefits from those who qualify as a “low income family” to those whose incomes do not exceed 200 percent of the maximum income of a “low-income family.” This is particularly important because since 2000, the number of uninsured Veterans has increased by more than 235,000, to 1.8 million nationwide.

"It is far past time to end the sort of decision-making observed in 2003. That policy unfairly disqualified many Veterans from receiving help owed to them," said Congressman Sestak. "Reversing this policy must be part of a restoration of a bipartisan, accountable and transparent approach to the way we take care of the men and women who serve our nation and, just as importantly, their families. This is particularly important at this time of economic challenge in our nation."

*Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the Congress.*

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